Ala. DA Reopens Probe Of FBI Ex-Informer

7/4/78 By Warren Brown
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An Alabama prosecutor said yesterday he will convene a grand jury to investigate whether onetime FBI informer Gary Thomas Rowe Jr. was involved in the 1965 killing of civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo.

Lowndes County District Attorney Jessie O. Bryan said he is reopening the investigation because of recent charges that Rowe, the FBI's top paid informer in the Ku Klux Klan in the 1960s, fired the shot that killed Liuzzo at the climax of a high-speed car chase on March 25, 1965. Liuzzo was involved in transporting participants in the Selma to Montgomery freedom march.

"Yes, sir, I surely will seek an indictment . . ." I don't have [the evidence] yet. But I expect to be able to bring this matter before a grand jury by Sept. 18," Bryan said.

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Bryan said his decision was based in part on public accusations by two former klansmen, Eugene Thomas and Collie leroy Wilkins, that Rowe did the fatal shooting. Thomas and Wilkins were convicted on conspirarcy charges and served federal prison terms in connection with the case, largely because of testimony by Rowe.

Thomas, Wilkins and a now-deceased third klansmen, William Orville Eaton, also were defendants in two state murder trials in the Liuzzo killing. Both trials ended with no convictions.

Thomas and Wilkins have said they would be willing to testify against Rowe even if doing so would make them vulnerbale to perjury charges because of actions and statements made in their defense in past trials. However, Bryan said yesterday "there is no possibility as far as I'm concerned" that the two would be charged with perjury as a result of testifying against Rowe.

"Murder is a hell of a lot more important crime than perjury," Bryan said. Besides, the prosecutor said he is collecting "ample evidence" from police officials in Birmingham, Ala., to bring a case against Rowe. "I don't necessarily have to rely on their testimony," he said of Thomas and Wilkins.

For some time now, Birmingham police have been looking into Rowe's activities with the klan. Birmingham police Capt. Jack LeGrand has named Rowe a "prime suspect" in another matter, the fatal 1963 bombing of a Birmingham Baptist church.

Rowe said yesterday as he did in an earlier interivew with The Washington Post, that all of the charges and investigations are part of an attempt by Birmingham police to discredit a television movie that implicates them in racial violence in the 1960s.

The movie, "My Undercover Years with the Ku Klux Klan," based on his book of the same title, has been produced for NBC television.

"They don't want to see that s—— on national television and that's why they're doing all of this," Rowe said of his accusers and investigators. "It took Birmingham nearly 15 years to build a new image, and now what they're trying to do is shut me up," he said.

Special correspondent Andrew Kilpatrick contributed to this report.